

Amazing Grace

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[0 : 0 0] And you'll find the passage from Ephesians on page 181 at the back of the Bibles in the pews. Continuing a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this is the third week of it, we're looking at the first half of chapter 2.

I must say I fear that this sermon will not make a lot of sense to some people. And I say that not because it's incomprehensible, though that may also be a factor, and certainly not because any of you I would consider stupid or anything, but rather because the first half of Ephesians 2 is so radical.

It is the reverse of so much of our thinking, and therefore it is hard to make sense of it. So let us pray. Father God, we pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened by you.

That we may know the hope to which you've called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurably great power in us who believe according to your power worked in Jesus Christ.

We pray this for his glory. Amen. Our assessment of human society and humanity is, I guess, rather ambiguous.

[1 : 2 5] In the light of mass murders, we think of the evil of our society and the evil of humanity. It's badness. But then also we reflect on the goodness of humanity.

Those who have been brave to shelter others from bullets. Those who've cared for others in the week that's passed, and so on. And as we consider humanity, we recognise our goodness.

Paul's analysis, the Bible's analysis, indeed God's analysis of human society, is far more devastating and trenchant than that.

Paul's statement in Ephesians 2 is that humanity, or human society, is dead. Not a mixture of good and bad.

Not basically good. Not even evil, but dead. And not only dead, but condemned. No half measures in this analysis of society. This is as blunt a statement as you can find about the condition of human society.

[2 : 3 3] Well, what do we make of it? Let's see what he says about it. In the preceding verses, as we saw last week, Paul has been praying that the Ephesians would know the power of God as it brought Jesus from death to life.

And he now draws a parallel between what happened to Jesus and what happens to Christians. That Jesus was dead and made alive by God's power.

And now he goes on to say, and you, you Ephesian Christians, you being dead, and later in this passage he'll talk about them being alive. So a parallel is being made.

And he begins the chapter, you being dead. In our translations we've got this bit in it, and you he made alive. But that's actually trying to make the English work because the Greek is so convoluted.

But all of that comes later in verses 4 and 5. Verses 1 to 3 is purely a description of the society of the Ephesian Christians being dead. Of course he's talking about spiritual death because they're physically alive.

[3 : 38] And he says that they were dead through the trespasses and sins. If you've ever played tennis, not that I have, but as far as I understand it, there are two types of fault you can make when you're serving.

The most common fault is when you hit the ball over the net usually, but it doesn't land in the square or the quarter of the court on the other side of the net. I hope you understand what I mean.

I'm not very good at tennis, you can tell. But you know what I mean. It doesn't land over the net in that quarter of the court and bounce in there. And that's a fault. And that's a bit like the word sin.

It misses the mark. It misses the spot that it's aimed at. It falls short or falls wide or goes too long. That's the common fault in tennis, I think.

The other fault is a bit like trespass. It is a foot fault. It's where you stumble or put your foot in the wrong spot. And a trespass is where we've just sort of veered off or we've stumbled over, we've made a mistake or a misdeed.

[4 : 39] A sin is just sort of falling short or wide. A trespass is stumbling or putting the foot in the wrong spot, putting our life in the wrong spot. Paul's critique is not just of occasional trespass or occasional sin.

He's not talking about Pete Sampras who occasionally will have a fault or a foot fault. Rather he's talking about people who are habitually at fault.

He makes that clear in verse 2. You are dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. Meaning you once practiced. It's a way of life.

The trespass and sin is an inherent part of the life of these Ephesian Christians as Paul describes it. Not just an occasional blunder, but an ongoing part of their life. And he describes that further in verse 2.

You once walked this way following the course of this world. We might say following the ethos of our society or something to that effect. And it raises the question again about how do we view the world?

[5 : 47] Do we view it with ambiguity about its goodness and its badness? Do we view it positively as though it's a good thing? Some people advocate that the church should adopt more of the culture of human society as it is today.

Or do we view it negatively, that it's a bad thing? That's more like what Paul is thinking about world society. He does not regard human society as a neutral thing.

He does not regard it as a totally positive thing. Fundamentally he regards it negatively. So he describes those who are dead as those who follow the course of the world.

The ethos of the world. Those who reflect perhaps the culture of the world in which they live. Now maybe you disagree. Maybe you think, ah, but human culture has changed.

Our human society is much different from St. Paul's. Our human culture is good. It has many good things about it. We should adopt more of it into our church.

[6 : 50] But that's actually not true. That's actually not right. Our human culture is as evil and as opposed to God as Paul's was. For it's our human culture that not only tolerates but boasts in sexual immorality.

Where the heir to the throne can boast of adultery publicly. Our human culture is one that idolises physical beauty and has no regard for godly character.

Ours is a culture that is manic about gambling. That is greedy in capitalism and consumerism. Our own covetousness is fed by the advertisements we see on television every five minutes.

And on billboards on every street. Our human culture, our human society is fed by desires for self-comfort and self-security in the possessions that we have.

Morality in our society is not determined by anything to do with God. Morality in our society is determined by popular vote and by economics. Morality in our society is determined by the people who are not allowed to do with God. What is right is where the money lies and where the votes lie.

[7 : 58] Money buys power in our society. Human rights in our society we may think are a good thing but indeed they are a disguise for selfishness. This is a world, this is a culture where peace is impossible.

The United Nations is futile in bringing about world peace. Our society does not achieve peace. It is not godly. Poverty in our society is ignored from the beginning of time to the end of time.

Promises to end poverty in 1990, 2090 or 20,090 are a waste of time. Political correctness is exalted above theological correctness and multi-faith worship is not only accepted but applauded and those who oppose it are despised.

That's our human society and that is fundamentally opposed to the gospel of God. Not only are all those things practised but all those things are highly respectable in our society and they are hardly God's standards at all.

Paul's assessment of his society and his society is very similar to ours indeed. In fact modern society is becoming more and more like ancient Greek society.

[9 : 16] Paul's assessment is that it is dead. Not that it is good, not that it's got glimpses of hope but that it is dead. Dead, lifeless, not even dying, not in a coma but dead.

It's a very final statement to make about human society. And he's not referring to those who are consciously opposed to God, those who are consciously satanic worshippers or something like that.

He goes on in verse 4 to talk about those who are following the prince of the power of the air, referring to Satan, a spiritual power of the air but not of heaven, of limited power. But he's not talking about people who are consciously worshipping Satan at all.

He's talking about every single person in the world. He makes that clear at the end of verse 3. The fairly damning indictment. Verse 3 he talks about society that is following the passions of the flesh, not meaning sexual gratification only.

He clarifies it by saying the desires of body and mind later in verse 3. But the desires of the flesh are the desires of fallen human nature. Sexual in part but also egocentric in part, desiring money in part.

[10 : 26] It's the whole way of thinking, he says, is wrong. Humanity is dead. Spiritually dead. And the Ephesian Christians, before they were Christians, were dead.

Not only dead but condemned to God's wrath. He says at the end of verse 3, so we were by nature children of wrath. We probably recoil a bit at mention of God's wrath.

We probably think it's an old-fashioned idea that should have gone out in the Stone Age, that should be confined to the Old Testament, not the New. But God's wrath is not capricious.

It is predictable. It is not vengeful but deserving. It is not spiteful. It is just. It is never hot-tempered like my father who'd hurled things out of the garage window smashing glass when he lost his temper in some fit.

But God's wrath is controlled. It is well-directed against any infringement of his perfect standards. It is in the New Testament as well as the Old, in Jesus as well as Paul.

[11 : 37] All sinners deserve God's wrath. It shows the seriousness of our sin. That God takes it seriously. It matters what we do. And all the sinners, Paul makes that clear.

He's not just talking, you see, about Ephesian Christians. It's not that they were a bad people before they became Christian people. It's not as though they were any different to us. But rather they are just like us and just like humanity from the beginning of time to the end of time.

So he says, we all once lived amongst these sorts of things at the beginning of verse 3. And then at the end he says, we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians weren't any different to the Colossians or the Romans or the Palestinians or modern people or more ancient people. All alike, all by nature, children of wrath because they are sinful.

It's not a very pretty picture of society. And probably many of you, I'm sure, are saying this is rubbish. But it's true. Because the criterion by which to judge society and to judge humanity is not to detect whether there is goodness in it, but rather whether there is sin.

[12 : 51] For good people are sinners. You probably think I'm a good person, but I can tell you very clearly that I'm a sinner. And many of you, if not all of you, are good people. But I'm sure that all of you are sinners in God's sight.

And as good people are sinners, so are bad people. So all people are sinners. And all indeed deserve God's wrath. Very final statement and very harsh to understand. And that's why I said at the beginning that I'm sure many of you will find this sermon uncomfortable.

But of course that's not the final story. Because as devastating as the picture of mankind is, so deep is the grace and love of God.

And it's only when we fully appreciate the depths of deadness in humanity without Christ will we fully appreciate the enormity of his grace and love in Christ.

And so the passage turns in verse 4 with a very resounding but God. You being dead were all these things but God.

[14 : 01] God acted. Not you because you're dead and dead people can't do a thing. God acted. And it's God who made you alive. And that's the subject and verb of the one sentence that covers verses 1 to 7.

Very convoluted sentence in Greek rearranged in the English but the basic sentence is You being dead God made alive. That's the fundamental message of this passage.

And God acts because dead people can't. God acts because dead people can't do a thing. And God acts to reverse the situation in verses 1 to 3.

Paul makes a parallel between what God has done for Christ and what he does for Christians. That as Christ was dead so were we. As Christ was raised from life so were we raised with him.

As Christ ascended to heaven so did we ascend to the heavenly places. As Christ was seated in heaven at God's right hand so are we seated in heaven alongside Christ. The parallel is very clear.

[14 : 58] What we affirm in the creed about Jesus Christ is true for us who are Christians. And it's only true in Christ and with Christ.

Notice how essential that is in verses 5 and 6 and 7. Even when we were dead through our trespasses God made us alive together with Christ by grace you've been saved and raised us up with him and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

For only in Christ and with Christ and in no other way is there salvation and grace from God. Only in Jesus Christ. It's exclusive. As the reading from the gospel said Jesus' own words I am the way the truth and the life no one comes to the Father but by me.

Paul is making the same sort of statement here. See it's not goodness that counts or badness but it's union with Jesus Christ. That and that alone is what determines whether you're a Christian or not.

It doesn't matter how good you are in the eyes of our society our society's values are all awry. Union with Jesus Christ is what counts and nothing else.

[16 : 20] And the God who is a God of wrath in verse 3 is the same God who is rich in mercy in verse 4. The same God who has loved us past tense referring to Jesus' death on the cross in verse 4.

The same God who bestows grace upon us in verse 5. The same God who demonstrates his kindness to us in verse 7 and 8. All of that is consistent with his wrath.

God is both a God of wrath and a God who is rich in mercy. And God's purpose in doing all this is not for our benefit so much although we did see some of that last week.

But as verse 7 shows God did this in order that he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. God is prompted to act not because of something in us but because of something in him.

It's because he has mercy that he acts not because of anything in me. It's because he loves that he acts not because of anything in me. It's unconditional mercy unconditional love unconditional grace unconditional kindness.

[17 : 27] There's nothing in me that warrants it whatsoever at all. It's not because we are good that God acts because we're religious or because we're C of E. It's not because we're middle class because we're white because we're Australian because we care for our elderly parents or we look after our children.

It's not because we help at the fete or we're on the vestry or in the mother's union or in the guild or anything else at all. It's because God is rich in mercy that he loves us and makes us alive and that is where it's so radical.

That is where this is so difficult to come to terms with because our world works on a different scale of values. Our world says you get what you deserve but God says no I'll give you what you don't deserve my grace and salvation.

Our world says you have to work to get a reward or benefit but God says no you can do nothing, no work in order to gain salvation. It's a free gift from me. The world says that what I do determines what I am and God says nothing you do matters.

I give you this free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. You don't do anything to get it. The world says I'm basically good so that God must accept me and God says no you're not perfect I won't but I will because I love you and have mercy and that's the only reason.

[18 : 46] Fundamentally different values to what our world is operating on and that's why this is so hard to understand. Dead people cannot do a thing. We don't earn our salvation but nor do we even contribute to it.

It is a totally free gift from God in Jesus Christ. One of my favourite hymns has this line in it nothing in my hand I bring but simply to thy cross I cling.

Nothing in my hand I bring but simply to thy cross I cling. For as long as we rely on ourselves our ability or our offering to God our Christian life is fatally flawed at the core.

that means you're not a Christian. We rely on Christ the demonstration of God's love and mercy and that alone.

Most people can't cope with this. Most religions don't cope with this. All other religions are religions of works things you have to do in order to get right with God.

[20 : 05] whether you're a Buddhist or a Jew Roman Catholic or Protestant even sometimes a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness or whatever they're all religions about what I have to do to get right with God.

But Christianity says nothing I do or offer earns or contributes to my salvation from God. God saves me because he's rich in mercy and his son died for me.

And though this does not make sense it is true. And of course it's great news. It's great news because God does it for us.

I can never be perfect for God. I can never be good enough for God. But God comes to me in my failure and saves me because he loves me and has mercy on me.

And the faith that I have in Jesus Christ is my response to the gift of salvation he offers. Even my faith is not something I do in order to warrant God's grace and salvation.

[21 : 11] It's the means of accepting the gift. Of course it's not quite the end of the story because God wants from us a response of gratitude and thankfulness.

As verse 10 says we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. But those good works are not the basis of our Christian life.

They're to be a response of gratitude and what those good works are will be explained further in chapters 4 to 6 of this letter. Let me conclude.

The world is divided not into good and bad for all are a mixture of the two. it is divided between those who are dead spiritually outside Christ and those who are alive in Christ.

And the difference between the two is not something that people do but is something God does in Christ. And the extraordinary change between those who are not Christians and those who become Christians is all the work of God.

[22 : 25] So people go from death to life from God's wrath to God's love and mercy from what we are by nature to what we become by God's grace from walking in sin and trespasses to walking in good works from belonging in this world to belonging in the heavenly realm with God from being under the power of the evil one to being controlled by God.

And we do not contribute a thing to that. Truly then this is amazing grace because it's nothing in me that warrants it.

It's God's love and mercy that prompts it. Amazing grace indeed. By grace you have been saved through faith. Paul says it twice in here.

It's a summary of the Christian gospel. It's what unites us as Christians. By grace you've been saved through faith. Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now I am found. I was blind but now I see. Let's stand and sing of God's amazing grace in Christ in the words of that hymn number 174.

[23 : 45] of that hymn of that little and let fucking